

The complex Oedipus

Helen Morales

Oliver Taplin, who has done so much to further our understanding of ancient Greek tragedy, and to promote modern performances and adaptations of it, writes: 'Athenian tragedy of the fifth century B.C. is one of those achievements of human creativity that is so rich, so deep, that it can be infinitely experienced afresh; that every age finds its own preoccupations explored in it, yet in a form that is not narrowly specific to the present' (*Greek with Consequence: the Lasting Significance of Greek Tragedy*). One Greek tragedy, experienced afresh in electrifying form last October, and which many *Omnibus* readers will have seen, is the Cambridge Greek Play, *Oedipus the King*. The production was a huge success: the actor Corin Redgrave chose it as one of the theatrical highlights of the year in his end of year review in *The Guardian* with the acclamation 'it was as urgent and disquieting as any play I have seen this year.' Yet it was in some ways a radical production. It is one of the more innovative aspects of the staging, the cross-dressing of some of the characters that I wish to discuss here.

Cross-dressing in Cambridge

The male protagonists, Oedipus, Creon, Teiresias, and the messenger, were all played by women, whereas the female protagonist, Jocasta, was acted by a man (the chorus was mixed). Why the gender reversal and what effect did it have? The first answer is a practical one and has to do with the nature of the production. A triennial event, the Cambridge Greek Play is acted by students, and students largely do the stage-managing, assistant directing and other behind-the-scenes work. The director, Annie Castledine, is a professional director with a reputation for taking imaginative approaches to gender interpretation. She says that in her experience, there are always many more female students than male who are willing to commit the time and energy to acting in a play. This means that the director can choose to limit herself to those plays with more female characters, or to do something more imaginative and reverse the genders. In the last few years there has also been a move in London theatre towards our great female actors, like Fiona Shaw and Kathryn Hunter, taking on magnificent male roles like Richard II and King Lear.

Reactions to the gender reversal were mixed. Some were so taken up with the power of the acting that they did not notice that Jocasta was played by a man. Others found it disturbing. There was an audience discussion each night with the cast and production team and the gender reversal was always debated. In ancient Athens, of course, all plays were, we think, performed by men, but there is no reason to suppose that audiences would have been any less diverse in their responses to those performances than we are. We tend to patronise ancient audiences (I never want to read 'the ancient audience would have thought' in an essay or article ever again...)

A more sophisticated reason for reversing the gender was to pay homage to – but show how the world has changed since – the first Cambridge Greek Play production of *Oedipus the King*. Until 1948 (only 55 years ago!) women were not allowed to act in the Greek play (though, one woman, Janet Case of Girton College, did sneak through to play Athena in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* in 1885). Despite the fact that women were made full members of the university in 1947, it was thought appropriate to maintain the Victorian tradition of sexual discrimination for

some years afterwards.

What a drag.....

Gender reversal can be very funny. In comedy, men often dress as women. The humour comes from the disjunction between feminine dress and the virile actor underneath. (Oliver Taplin himself has been known to don female dress when playing Dionysus in Aristophanes' *Frogs* in a production on a JACT Greek course) Sometimes men in drag parody women in a way that serves to ridicule them, with misogynistic exaggeration of stereotypically female traits and gestures – think of Lily Savage or some of the characters in Little Britain. Agathon and Cleisthenes in Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria* are represented wearing women's clothes as part of their portrayal as 'kinaidoi'. The 'kinaidos' was a figure of abuse, rather than a 'real' type of person (in other words, no-one ever called himself a 'kinaidos') designed to poke fun at these prominent Athenians. Here cross-dressing tends to reinforce, rather than challenge, gender norms.

Effeminacy in Greek tragedy

Heroes and kings in Greek tragedy are frequently effeminised. For us, any kind of cross-dressing or gender reversal, whether on stage or not, concerns sexuality. Our conceptions of gender are so bound up with sexuality that we tend to interpret crossing the boundaries of gender as also crossing the boundaries of sexuality, whether or not this in fact the case. This influences how we read Greek tragedy. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Pentheus is persuaded by the god Dionysus to put on a woman's girdle and dress before spying on the Theban women. Earlier in the play, Pentheus shows himself to be preoccupied with Dionysus' feminine appearance. He says: 'You are not without beauty, so far as your body goes, at least for women, stranger, which is why you are at Thebes' (453–4). Some scholars have interpreted Pentheus' cross-dressing and fascination with Dionysus' femininity as revealing his latent homosexual desire. But this is a misunderstanding of ancient conceptions of gender. Rather, the feminisation of Pentheus is indicative of his downfall. He is no longer the masculine ruler, in control of his city, but an effeminate loser, controlled by the god. He is now open to the public ridicule which he so fears. 'I want him to be laughed at by the Thebans', says Dionysus, 'led with a woman's appearance through the city, after his earlier boasting, with which he was so terrible' (854–56).

In a difficult speech in Sophocles' *Ajax*, in the scene before he commits suicide (something usually done by female, not male, characters), the hero declares himself effeminised: 'For even I, who once was terribly powerful, like iron by dipping, have become womanish in my mouth' (or 'in my sword' – the line is ambiguous) (650–1). Feminisation here is a form of self-ridicule; a means by which Ajax criticises himself. At the end of *Oedipus of King*, the wretched Oedipus is also effeminised. As the balance of power shifts from the king to his brother Creon, Creon speaks to him in a way in which a father might address his daughter. He speaks of Oedipus' sense of shame (*aidos*) and of how inappropriate it is for him to be outside the house (1424–31). This reminds us of Electra in Sophocles' *Electra* (516–18); Oedipus is being treated like an unmarried girl. In the

Cambridge production, Marta Zlatic's sex gave her performance as Oedipus an extra frisson in this final scene. She was able to render his journey of disintegration from powerful king to feminised pollutant with amazing, and touching, ability.

Gender and identity: know yourself

If gender reversal in comedy typically serves to reinforce gender norms, the decision to reverse genders in the casting of tragedy typically does not. Women playing parts written for men (and vice versa) challenges gender norms. It questions the fixity of gender identities. *Oedipus the King* is a play centrally concerned with identity; with what it means to be a man: human, king, father, husband, son. Its importance in psychoanalysis has made this aspect of the play even more prominent. Freud's use of the drama in his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) made the myth the story of every man. He said to a friend, William Fliess, in 1897, 'I now regard it [falling in love with the mother and jealousy of the father] as a universal event in childhood...If that is so, we can understand the riveting power of *Oedipus Rex*.' However, this is envisaged as the story of every man, a story about masculinity and male identity. Reversing the genders in the casting of the Cambridge play both tells this story, and adds another. It puts on the agenda what it means to be a woman: human, queen, mother, wife, daughter. It invites us to question, in a more active way, the indices of identity, and what it means to – in the words of Apollo's temple at Delphi – 'Know Thyself'. What could be more 'urgent and disquieting' than that?

*Helen Morales teaches Classics at Newnham College, Cambridge and was editor of **Omnibus** 32 and 33. She has published on the ancient novel, and gender and sexuality in antiquity. She is involved in the preparation of the next Cambridge Greek Play (October 2007).*